

THE BLACK HUT

WORDS **SUSIE WONG** | PHOTOGRAPHY **CHER HIM, WEIZHONG DENG, AUDREY KOH & BOEDI WIDJAJA**

Boedi Widjaja's latest installation expresses a textural representation of an exodus through fondest memories

BOEDI WIDJAJA: BLACK-HUT

**An Affiliate Project of Singapore Biennale 2016
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore
28 Oct 2016 – 1 Feb 2017**

A room within a room.

This is how the installation *Black-Hut* by Boedi Widjaja is expressed in the exhibition text: a "major architectural and sound work – a room within a room – that links diverse conceptual references through his own lived experiences of migration, culture and aesthetics."

A room, into which one enters and stays and lives, and from which one departs and to which one returns, proffers readings at several levels.



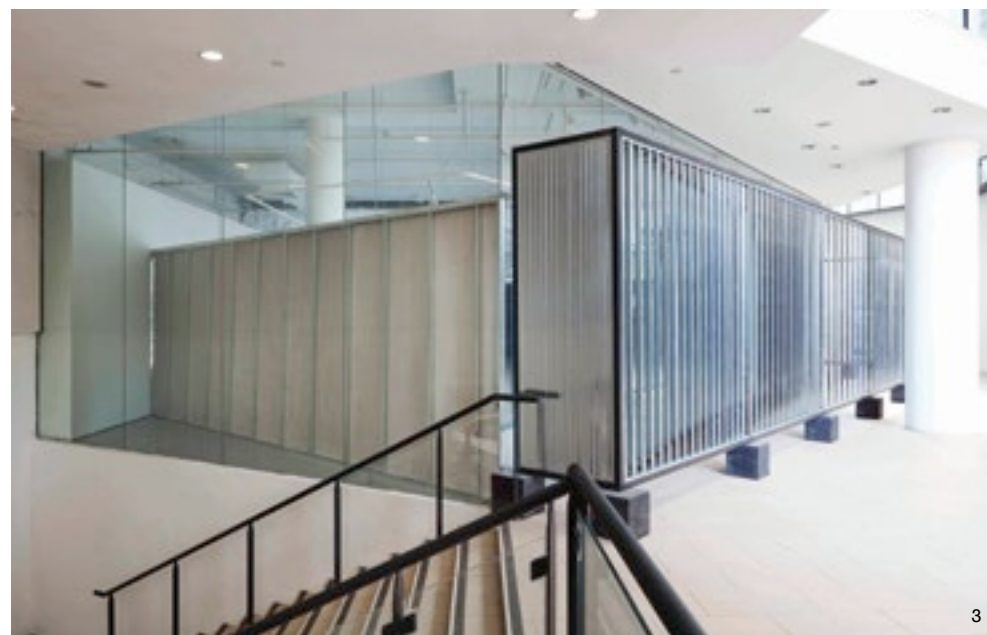
13 The artist Boedi Widjaja seen here creating textures through charcoal frottages at his childhood home in Solo (Surakarta), Indonesia, 2012.





2\ The series of “footings” supporting the cage-like ‘gate’ or the umpak, references to Javanese pavilions, are solid concrete bases in which wooden supports or pillars are slotted.

3\ The “room within a room” is a built space that begins as a void.



As an architect, the room is a building.

As an artist, the room becomes the synonymous with one’s body, even as a “second body” (as Paul Auster suggests¹) constructed through one’s dwelling, where “an entire universe...a miniature cosmology...a shrine...in praise of all that exists beyond the body: the representation of one man’s inner world, even to the slightest detail.”

The Earl Lu gallery space is radically transformed for the work *Black-Hut*. In order to enter the space, one has to follow a cage-like façade, like a gate of vertical steel bars which literally bars the usual entrance, toward nearly its end, where the bars separate sufficiently enough for you to step over the low horizontal bar into its recess, and then follow that back to where the gallery’s glass doors are. The gallery space within has been dissected into several areas, by partition walls that are erected for the installation to form a “square” room.

An Indonesian-born Singaporean, Boedi Widjaja, is both an architect and an artist with works shown at The Substation, Jendela at the Esplanade and Objectifs in recent years.

It is architecture that informs this work, *Black-Hut*, where questions of proportions and materials come into play.

It is also theorisations on “dwelling” that conceptually underpins it. Boedi considers *Black-Hut* along two trajectories: building and dwelling, resonating with Heidegger’s seminal text *Building Dwelling Thinking*. These convey the act of building and dwelling.

To build and to dwell.

The installation is prompted by Boedi’s memory of his childhood home in Solo, Java, which he left when he was only nine for Singapore with its “boxy” concrete highrises. The project was triggered by recent news that the house was put on the market to be sold. He returned for a visit in 2012 and walked through the house, making several graphite frottages of its walls, doors. In the same year he also made a sojourn to his ancestral village in China near Xiamen in Fujian, where he discovers that homes, 300-400 years old and “built along ancient Chinese architectural principles,” were being torn down to make way for more modern buildings.

The anticipation or the actuality of the demolition of houses in these places reinforces the installation, where a sense of loss ensues.

Black-Hut references the “hut” as the basic “architectural typology”² of building. It is “the most immediate, pre-vernacular building.”³ ‘Black,’ as the walls are pigmented black, may point to the black box as a metaphor, as well as an allusion to the Black Forest, mentioned in Heidegger’s text *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1951). The ‘black box’ is an abstraction, a system in which the internal workings are irrelevant and only the results matter. Boedi elucidates: “I would like to imagine that when we turn the black box inside-out, we discover a void, in other words, a system that operates out of invisibility. That is my test for the installation, whether it renders an invisible image out of its fullness.”⁴

Indeed the “room within a room” is a built space that begins as a void.

Using an axis – a midpoint calculated from distances between three columns that exist within the gallery space– Boedi constructs a square – calculated

1. Paul Auster, *Invention of Solitude* 2. *Skin Deep*, Joshua Comaroff, in Boedi Widjaja: *Black-Hut*, ICA Singapore 2016 3. *Ibid* 4. interview with Boedi Widjaja by Melanie Pocock and Bala Starr, in Boedi Widjaja: *Black-Hut*, ICA Singapore 2016

4\ Black-Hut invokes a more memory-sensed and materialist relationship to the body in the way that a 'dwelling' or the "invisible image out of the fullness" of Boedi's thought may emerge.



from the width and breadth of Ear Lu gallery – rotated at 45° to sit at an angle in a dramatic misalignment from the physical dimensions of the gallery space. This “room” encloses all four columns of the gallery, one which stands just outside its glass facade. One corner of this square moves into the imaginary space beyond the walls of the gallery.

Those upright light-gauge hollow steel parallel bars form a new façade to the gallery that serves to constitute one of the walls of the square grid of a “room.” This construction feature is echoed in the partition walls, the backs of which are exposed to the audience.

Against the harshly clinical modernist building, against concrete, against the grid, against the ‘box,’ against rationality, Boedi has imbued this other void space, with cues of other traditions and the personal. Prompted by a vivid dream, as described by Boedi, involves Le Corbusier lying on a forensic table carrying out a self-autopsy. His fingers pull apart his face, and

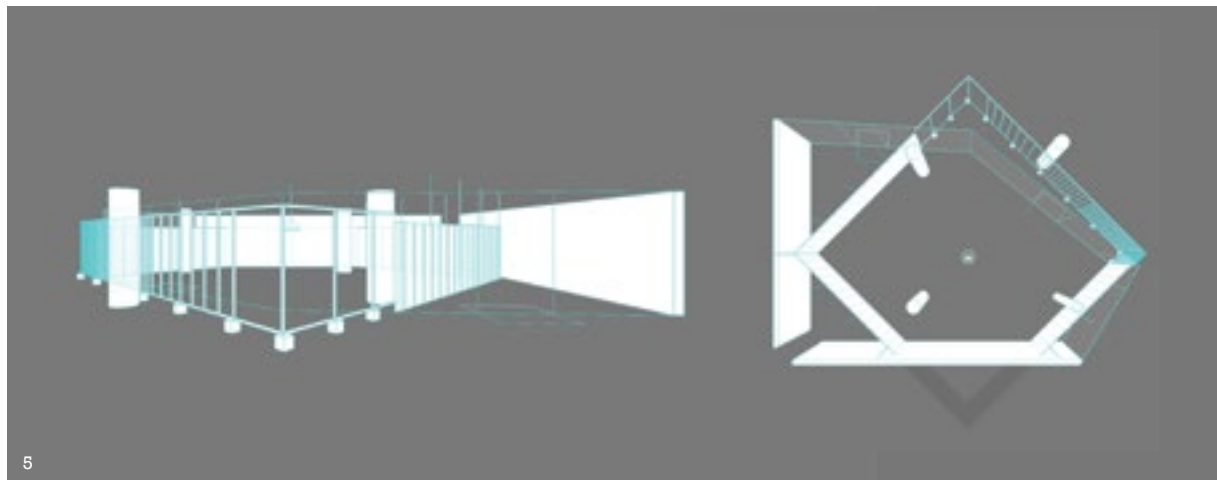
above him, projected over a screen, images of his social housing projects rise and fall apart in synchronicity with the facial re-arrangements.

The exposure of the anatomical structures of the body instigates Boedi to surgically deconstruct the ‘room.’ To him, there are several architectural traditions at play: modernist (attributed to western); Chinese architectural ideas;⁵⁻ and Javanese, which Boedi suggests may have more in common to how a building is designed.

The void is no longer a void but carries suggestions of an other-dimensionality.

There are unique features such as the series of “footings” which supports the cage-like ‘gate’ or the *umpak*, references to Javanese pavilions are solid concrete bases in which wooden supports or pillars are slotted.

The inner surfaces of the walls (facing the room) and the *umpaks* were treated with a mix of pigmented concrete (black), mica and salt. From smooth to



5



6

5\\ Boedi Widjaja, diagram of Black-Hut, 2016, digital images, dimensions variable. © Courtesy of artist

6\\ Against the harshly clinical modernist building, against concrete, against the grid, against the 'box,' against rationality, Boedi has imbued this other void space, with cues of other traditions and the personal.

impasto-painterly, these surfaces are troweled over in different proportions of amounts or in the case of salt, size of the grains. With time, crystals of salt will bleed out, owing to the efflorescent nature of concrete. The walls become the skin of the “second body” (that Auster referred to) “as if the body had been transformed into a mind, a breathing instrument of pure thought.” This metaphor is pushed further when one considers that the body is made up of 0.4 percent salt, generally the equivalence of seawater.

Tones ring and reverberate throughout the space – filtering through the sound system that also marks the mid-point axis. These polyphonic scales are gamelan, a series of complex notes collected from a unique set of gamelan instruments, and digitally reversed.

Returning to the building as a dwelling, in essence dwelling is “to make yourself a home;” “To have a sense of place.”

Quite contrary to the modernism’s machine aesthetics, *Black-Hut* invokes a more memory-sensed

and materialist relationship to the body in the way that a ‘dwelling’ or the “invisible image out of the fullness” of Boedi’s thought may emerge. To ‘dwell’ after all connotes a space where the person inhabits and lives.

Inlaid in its walls with the life of the inhabitant, his or her traces, marks and memories. “Memory as a room, as a body, as a skull that encloses the room in which a body sits. As in the image, ‘a man sat alone in his room.’”⁶ From the outer – the shell of the house – to the inner spaces whose limits do not stop at walls but goes beyond it – even through its inhabitant. One needs to “[to contract] your mind to some infinitely small point within itself,”⁷ on order to breathe in the space.

And again, to Boedi’s connection to home and homeland, asserted by his walking through a childhood home (somewhere else), embracing its walls through the act of frottage, and just being in a house that will soon be demolished, contextualises the work – the room within a room – which was installed here. One “cannot really leave the childhood home.”⁸

The coldness and starkness of the concrete laden built room reifies into a memory of dwelling, eclipsed as it were by geometry and material. Homeland to Boedi can be the ancestral village in China, or the childhood house in Solo, Java, Indonesia. Harking to its architectural traditions, Boedi expresses the lineage in the presence of architectural cues whether they are the “footings,” or the raised thresholds that one crosses over to enter or leave a room.

The work embodies the cultural anxieties of movement, emigration, a topic close to Boedi’s own reflections of his identity. He talks about his departure from Solo to Singapore in 1984 as traumatic, made under circumstances that were rife with ethnic tensions, as a child of nine, and his experience in a city of concrete “boxy” highrises. What is homeland to Boedi? What does it mean to return to somewhere or to come from somewhere?

An expression of home is perhaps the expression of homelands. +

5. Chinese Architecture: A Pictorial History, by Liang Su-Cheng, trans. Wilma Fairbank, MIT press, 1984
6. Auster 7. Auster 8. Gaston Bachelard, Poetics of Space.